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ABSTRACT

Students considered at-risk are defined as students who lack a sense of identity, personal connectedness, and personal power. Another characteristic of at-risk students is the role parents play or fail to play in the at-risk behavior. A case is made for all students being at risk at some point in their lives. Four programs were designed and implemented to help at-risk and marginal students at one junior high school. The four programs include the OK Club, the Quest for Success Skills Program, the I-CANN (Individualized Course Alternative, Now or Never), and the Student Assistance Council. The OK Club is designed to build self-esteem and to provide after school-support and requires a strong parental component. The Quest for Success Skills Program is a transition program which prepares at risk sixth-graders for junior high school. The I-CANN Program provides counseling, development of self-esteem, and a hands-on curriculum. It also has a strong parental component. The Student Assistance Council involves a staff team that assesses the needs of at-risk students and recommends actions to address those needs. A successful program must begin with an attitude of caring. This caring attitude must be reflected by the total school staff toward every student and his or her family. (ABL)

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Effective Programs for At-Risk Adolescents

John W. Dougherty

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JOHN W. DOUGHERTY

John W. Dougherty is principal of Hazelwood Junior High School in Florissant, Missouri, where he helped to develop and implement the programs described in this fastback. He was named Principal of the Year for 1989-90 by the St. Louis Association of Secondary School Principals.

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Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

Effective Programs for At-Risk Adolescents

by
John W. Dougherty

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Introduction

What does it mean for students to be "at risk?" Some are at risk of not finishing or even starting their high school education. Some have known nothing but failure, disappointment, and ridicule since kindergarten and so the idea of quitting school may not be as risky as continuing. If failure is all that students have known, then they might take the risk of finding success through some other avenue. Some will never find that avenue and thus are at risk for being failures all their lives, but they will always blame the school for their failure.

Some students are at risk even though they attend school. They are at risk of being caught up in the adolescent subworld of drugs and alcohol. Here they can escape from themselves, their failures, and their dysfunctional families. The drug world makes no demands on them except to take drugs.

Some students are at risk of becoming pregnant. Becoming pregnant proves that for a little while you were of some value to someone. Disregard the consequences of bringing a child into the world; disregard the impact a pregnancy has on a family and the community. For one brief moment, you were important in some male's life.

Some students are at risk of ending it all. Faced with repeated failure, feeling no one cares, seeing no hope, some are ready to dismiss all the effort that parents have put into their lives and are unwilling

to seek help from those who could assist them. It's too risky to go on, and so they are at risk of committing suicide.

Apathy or "I'll let other people do it" places society at risk. If too many of our young people accept this attitude, they come to regard school as a great place to socialize until they are 16, or become pregnant, or get kicked out. And then it's welfare or prison time. Society pays.

If there is any hope of preventing some or all of the above risks, it rests with the schools. Families of at-risk kids are often so dysfunctional that they need more assistance than their children do. Other institutions do not have access to these youngsters until the situation becomes a crisis or laws are violated. The schools have them every day.

This fastback describes the programs at one junior high school designed to help at-risk and marginal students. It begins by identifying the factors associated with being at risk and makes a case for all students being at risk at some point in their lives as circumstances change.

The four programs featured here are:

1. The OK Club. This program is designed to build self-esteem and provide after-school tutorial support. A strong parental component is required.
2. The Quest for Success Skills Program. This program prepares at-risk sixth-graders for junior high school. The program is conducted during the summer. It has become a model for the St. Louis County area.
3. The I-CANN Program (Individualized Course Alternative, Now or Never). This program provides counseling, development of self-esteem, and a hands-on curriculum. It also has a strong parental component.
4. The Student Assistance Council. This program involves a staff team that assesses the needs of at-risk students and recommends actions to address those needs.

These programs are not offered as a panacea for solving all the problems of at-risk adolescents; but if they suggest approaches that can be adopted or adapted in other schools, then the author's purpose will have been fulfilled.

Who Are At-Risk Students?

At-risk or marginal students have always been with us. They are the right-hand side of the bell-shaped curve. They are the ones responsible for a school having an assistant principal for discipline. They are that fluctuating layer that lies between those students who are labeled "average" and those who receive special resources not available to the average student. They certainly are not the students we have in mind as we make our lesson plans. If they have always been in the schools, why are we so concerned now? The answer is that their numbers are increasing rapidly. And currently, there are no sure remedies for stemming the tide.

Others have come up with their own definitions of at-risk students. The Focus Program of St. Paul, Minnesota, (Focus Dissemination Project Bulletin 1988) defines them as disaffected students having the following characteristics:

- Inability to function within the traditional classroom setting.
- Academic skill development below ability.
- General underachievement (below average for ability).
- Failure to establish goals regarding occupational future.
- Pattern of behavior problems.
- Absenteeism and tardiness.
- Lack of motivation, direction, and drive.
- Poor self-image.
- Stressful family situation having a detrimental effect.

- Hostility toward adults and authority figures.
- Identified as a potential dropout.
- Difficulty with community agencies and the law.
- General lack of involvement in any school activity.
- Serious economic problems that threaten completion of school.

An *Education Week* survey (Jennings 1988) of all 50 states found 25 that had developed formal definitions of at-risk students. California defines students as "high risk" who exhibit the following characteristics: absenteeism, truancy, frequent tardiness, poor grades, low math and reading scores, failure in one or more grades, limited extracurricular participation, lack of identification with school, failure to see the relevance of education to life experience, boredom with school, disruptive behavior and rebellious attitudes toward authority, verbal and language deficiencies, and inability to tolerate structured activities.

Connecticut declares its at-risk population to be "young people through age 21 who may not earn a high-school diploma and graduate with adequate academic and social competencies and attributes which prepare them to pursue additional educational experiences; become successfully employed; and/or make a successful transition to adulthood and become productive members of society." In Iowa the at-risk are those "whose aspirations and achievements may be negatively affected by stereotypes linked to race, national origin, language background, gender, income, family status, parental status, and disability." Texas primarily uses failing grades and retention for identifying at-risk students.

The National Drug Policy Board (an arm of the U.S. Justice Department) identified the "high-risk" population as children who, because of such life experiences as abuse or poverty, are likely to abuse drugs or alcohol. In its report, it identifies 10 factors that increase a child's vulnerability to the lure of drugs:

- Having parents who use drugs.
- Being the victim of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse.

- Dropping out of school.
- Becoming pregnant.
- Being economically disadvantaged.
- Committing a violent or delinquent act.
- Experiencing mental-health problems.
- Attempting suicide.
- Running away from home.
- Being homeless.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (1987) reports research that identifies 16 "symptoms," or indicators of potential dropouts, the first 11 of which are reliable predictors as early as elementary school.

1. High absentee rate.
2. High truancy rate.
3. Low academic skills or aptitude, including
   a) low grades,
   b) weak reading skills,
   c) low test scores and academic deficiencies, or
   d) a history of failure/being held back in school.
4. Referrals for social work or psychological assistance.
5. Recurring discipline problems.
6. Rebellious attitude/inability to relate to authority.
7. A low-income family.
8. A poorly educated mother.
9. A fatherless home.
10. A parent or sibling who dropped out of school.
11. Low self-esteem.
12. Numerous family relocations.
13. Poor social adjustments or deviant social behavior.
14. Disengagement from school, including
    a) apathy,
    b) negative attitudes,

c) limited participation in extracurricular activities, or
d) lack of identification with school.

15. High rate of alcoholism among parents.
16. Having a job, working more than half-time while in high school.

These lists of characteristics of at-risk students have much in common. Essentially, they are talking about youngsters who lack a sense of identity, who lack a sense of connectedness, and who lack a sense of personal power. Remedying these three lacks should be high on the agenda of schools that are committed to helping at-risk students.

Another generalization that emerges from the list of characteristics is the role parents play (or fail to play) in the at-risk behavior of students. Schools cannot help troubled students in isolation from their parents. Family support programs are needed to enlist the involvement of parents. Family support begins with the premise that all families have strengths and that all families benefit from support. Further, as partners in the effort, parents are respected for their contributions (Kagan 1989).

For schools to be successful with marginal students (or any students, for that matter), the family must play an integral role in the educational process. What the school does in a six- or seven-hour day must be reinforced by the family for the remaining 17 or 18 hours. Given the many forms of families the school works with today, the process of bringing the family and school closer is no easy task; but the rewards are many.

When parents are involved with their children's schools, the results are:

- A rise in student achievement scores.
- An improvement in student attendance.
- A reduction in the dropout rate.
- An improvement in student motivation, self-esteem, and behavior.

- More parent and community support of the school (Henderson 1987).

Involvement of parents is an essential component of an effective program for at-risk students. Parents must understand why their child is at risk. And if they do not have the skills to cope with or correct the situation, then the school has a responsibility to assist the parents.

Keeping in mind the characteristics of at-risk students and the importance of parental involvement, let us turn now to some program models that been effective in working with at-risk students at Hazelwood Junior High School.

The OK Club: Tutoring the Child, Counseling the Family

In the spring of 1984, the faculty at Hazelwood Junior High School engaged in its annual evaluation of the previous year. One of the complaints that surfaced was students' lack of study skills and their failure to complete assignments and turn them in. As the faculty discussed this cluster of problems, they soon realized that they were talking about the same group of kids. These were the ones with low grades, little self-esteem, poor organizational skills, no parental involvement with the schools and little with their children. Today, we would call these students "at-risk." In the spring of 1984, the faculty didn't know what to call them but did know that they needed help, and it was up to them to do something. What to do?

The faculty's initial response was to establish an after-school study hall where the students could stay and do their homework. This seemed like a good idea, because the school had a traditional six-period day with little time left for students to do homework during the school day. After much discussion, the faculty concluded that no one really believed that this would solve the problem. Few, if any, of these marginal learners would voluntarily attend an after-school study hall. And, even if they did, they probably would not make good use of the time.

The faculty's second option was to provide tutorial sessions where staff would tutor students in subjects in which they were having difficulty or failing. This idea was also rejected. A teacher could tutor

a child in one subject but could not do an effective job in four, five, or six subjects. What to do?

Further deliberations by the faculty resulted in putting into place a program with a very basic premise: In order for students to succeed, the school must first teach study skills, develop students' self-discipline, and provide motivation. Second, the school must help parents to help their kids to become better students. Third, the school must provide supervision of homework and study skills if parents are unwilling or unable to provide it.

The program's focus was on improving study skills, which would be useful in all subjects. Launched in the fall of 1985 with a grant from the Danforth Foundation, the program, called NoFAIL (Necessary For All Individuals to Learn), attempted to teach students how to study, how to take different types of tests in different academic areas, and how to manage time and other organizational skills. Students identified by the staff were scheduled into after-school sessions two days a week. Half would come on Monday and Wednesday, the other on Tuesday and Thursday. A great deal of flexibility was permitted so students could still participate in after-school clubs and sports.

Four excellent teachers were selected to work with the students. They used commercially prepared study-skills programs as well as their own techniques. Some improvement occurred, but the gains were not as great as desired or what had been hoped for. Students attended the sessions and did the assignments, but their hearts and minds were never really with the program. Another hour after school did not seem to matter to them. In fact, they resented having to attend more school. A well-intentioned program to help students was failing because it met the needs of the teachers but not those of the students.

The following semester the faculty started developing a program that would replace NoFAIL the next fall. The first thing that was done was to change the name to the OK Club. The "OK" stands for "Opportunity Knocks" or "Outstanding Kids," which have a more positive ring

to them than NoFAIL. The new program would retain the emphasis on study skills but would do much more with developing students' self-esteem and motivation.

Teachers used materials from many sources. One teacher was an admirer of Zig Zieglar, the well-known business consultant and motivation speaker, and used his tapes and materials to motivate and inspire the students. Another teacher was an ardent follower of Jack Canfield and used his *Self-Esteem in the Classroom* curriculum, which is based on the premise that self-esteem comes from the belief and experience that one is lovable and capable. Perhaps most important was the overall positive approach the teachers took toward the program and the students. When students begin to feel good about themselves, their studies, and their school, they are on the road to success.

Small things were as important in making students feel good about themselves as were some of the bigger ones. Cookies and punch after a particularly good session were as important as recognition at the PTA meeting. Being selected as Student of the Week was more important than being recognized on Award's Day at the end of the year. Building self-esteem coupled with work on study skills seemed to be helping these students, but there was a third component vital to the program's success: parents.

The faculty knew that the success of the OK Club would depend on strong parental support. They also knew that parents of students in the OK Club were not likely to get involved because they had never been involved. For example, when failing notices were sent home, there was less than a 3% response. (Candidates for the OK Club generally received the bulk of these notices.) Many of these parents have the attitude that it is the school's role to educate their children. And even when the schools offer to help parents, they are resistant. The faculty decided that they would accept this challenge. To this end they planned monthly parental meetings designed to help parents help kids become better people and better students.

A family is a system. The various family members interact in ways that affect the system positively or negatively. Efforts to intervene with one member of the family has repercussions for all family members. Therefore, if schools are to help at-risk students, they cannot limit their efforts to the student alone but must also interact with the family. In short, the student won't change unless the family also changes.

The school made it a requirement that if students were to be admitted to the OK Club, their parents had to attend the meetings. The students were frequently reminded to urge their parents to attend, invitations were sent, phone calls made, and refreshments were provided at every meeting. It worked. Parents came, enjoyed the meeting, and came back monthly. Why?

In the past parents had complained that the school was able to define their children's problems but failed to offer specific ways parents could help solve the problems. To these parents the OK Club was a solution, and they wanted to do their part. One parent said, "It sure makes me feel better knowing I'm not alone in my concerns about my child's progress." Thus the OK Club parent meetings became a support group for those who previously had been frustrated by their inability to help their children succeed in school and who thought they were the only ones having these problems.

One measure of the program's success was the parents' willingness to attend evening sessions on parenting skills, where they learned about reasons for misbehavior, encouragement skills, communication, and reflective listening techniques. In these sessions parents also learned to deal with the guilt they experience when they have a child who clearly is capable but is not achieving at an acceptable level. Once they were able to deal with the guilt, they felt more confident in helping their child assume responsibility for his or her education.

Typically there are six or seven monthly parent meetings. Topics covered include: Introduction to the OK Club, Homework, Understanding Your Teenagers, Family Interaction, Communication Skills,

and Self-Esteem. Resources for reading and discussion include: *Families as Educators, Careers, The Cornucopia Kids*, and *Helping Youth Decide* (see Bibliography for publishers).

How successful has the OK Club been? For the past three years parents have been asked to complete an open-ended evaluation questionnaire. Also, teacher evaluations and student grades were used to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Parent Evaluation

When asked their general impression of the OK Club, 388 parents responded favorably, 28 unfavorably. Some typical favorable comments were:

"I think that it has helped my daughter, and it also has helped her parents."
"My child is more aware of studying and doing homework."
"It makes me feel that the school really wants my child to do well."
"A positive effort to help children improve in their schoolwork."
"I think it is a fantastic program."
"It fosters a positive relationship between home and school."
"It was good to know that other kids and parents also have problems."

When asked what their child's impression of the OK Club was, 208 parents responded positively with such statements as:

"Once he stopped thinking of it as punishment, I believe he enjoyed being a part of this group. He now knows he is not the only one with this problem."
"He felt it was a punishment at first, then liked it, then felt it a punishment again the last 2 weeks. However, he did admit it helped him."
"At first he saw it as a punishment, but gradually seemed to feel good that he could get his work completed and have some positive help. It was a logical consequence that seemed to work."

"He felt it was helpful, and he's glad he was involved in the program. He feels like he has learned some good study habits."
"At first, not very responsive, but as time went on, his ideas changed."

When asked whether the program was beneficial for their child, 70% of the parents said "Yes," 10% said "No." Some of the favorable comments were:

"Yes, I think it has taught my child better study habits. Before he was in OK Club, I had to help him get started on his homework. Now he can do a good part of it with no assistance."
"Yes, I just hope it's a lasting one."
"Yes, several small, but certainly noticeable, changes."
"Yes, and I have learned how to help my child also."
"Yes, more efficient use of time. He has a plan of attack for his homework."
"Yes, he seems to be striving harder as far as his study and work habits."

Some negative responses were:

"She viewed it as punishment."
"He hated it."
"His grades didn't get any better, and he didn't like it."

Also, 280 of the parents reported that the monthly parent meetings were most helpful. Some typical comments were:

"The suggestions on parenting were great."
"The meetings helped me understand why he does some of the things he does and effective ways to deal with them."
"Yes. I face events with him more calmly."
"Very helpful. I have tried to 'lighten up' at home."
"Yes. It was motivating and very encouraging. I wish my husband was here to hear about it too."

"Very much so. I'll be trying to re-evaluate my techniques used on all my teenagers."

"Yes, very. It's comforting to share experiences with other parents who are struggling with some problems."

Teacher Evaluation

The teachers' evaluations were equally supportive of the program. They reported that their students were better prepared for class, more attentive, better organized, and in several instances, had a better attitude toward school and, more importantly, toward themselves. The teachers' evaluations indicated an increased appreciation for the teaching of study and organizational skills. Teachers also expressed the value of parental involvement and reported noticeable improvement in students whose parents had been conscientious about attending the parent meetings.

The teachers reported that students were not losing as many papers and were showing more concern for completing their homework. They also agreed that providing an environment conducive to study is a key to success for many of these students, since parents do not always monitor the quality of their children's homework or provide the structure this program offers.

Student Evaluation

The OK Club year is divided into five sequences of approximately equal length. If enrollment in just one sequence is not long enough to achieve desired results, many students and their parents elect to continue in the program for additional sequences. This group of students showed the greatest overall improvement. Although it is difficult to directly assess gains in self-concept, organizational skills, and accepting responsibility, these qualities are reflected indirectly in the grades OK Club students received in the four basic academic areas of math, English, social studies, and science.

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Of the 1,240 grades given in the first grading period, 30% showed improvement, 50.32% showed no change, and 19.68% declined. In terms of achievement in the four academic areas, 85% showed improvement in at least one area, 11% improved in all four areas, and 20% showed no improvement. While the program cannot be judged an unqualified success for all students enrolled, one must remember that these were failing students for the most part; so if 30% of the total grades improved and if 85% of the grades improved in at least one academic area, then this is significant improvement for this population.

Another interesting set of statistics is a comparison of homework grades of students whose parents participated regularly in the OK Club parent sessions with students whose parents did not participate or participated only occasionally. Of students with participating parents, 92% improved in one area, 10% improved in all four areas, and only 3% showed no improvement. By contrast, of students without participating parents, 71% improved in one area, none improved in all four areas, and 29% showed no improvement. Cause and effect can not be proved, but these statistics strongly suggest that parents were a factor influencing the improved homework grades of those students whose parents attended the parent sessions.

From the subjective data from parents and teachers and the data from OK Club students' grades, the program must be viewed as a success. It has met the objectives and most of the expectations established for the program. The parents were more positive than the teachers, but that is to be expected; they have more at stake – the success of their own child.

Clearly, longer-range studies with more rigorous methodology are needed to assess the impact of home-school cooperation on improving student achievement and reducing absenteeism. But the preliminary evaluation of the OK Club supports the view that such programs do help to establish better communication between the school and home and result in greater support from parents.

Quest for Success Skills Program

Each October it had been policy at Hazelwood Junior High School for the faculty to identify in-coming seventh-graders who were having difficulty adjusting behaviorally and academically. It was good that they were being identified, but unfortunate that it did not occur until October. Consequently, the principal proposed a program for these at-risk students, which would take place before school opened in the fall, thus avoiding loss of educational time once regular classes began.

The first question posed was: "How do you identify students who need a transition program between the sixth grade and junior high school when you don't know the students?" Fortunately, the junior high had long had excellent rapport with the eight feeder schools in its attendance area. These elementary schools had a good track record for recommending students for remedial math and reading programs, gifted programs, etc., so their judgment was to be trusted when it came to recommending students for the transition program.

In April, the eight elementary principals, the school counselors, and the sixth-grade teachers were asked to identify any sixth-grader who in their judgment would have difficulty making the transition from the elementary school to junior high school. These students did not necessarily fit the usual characteristics of at-risk students, but they were correctly identified as being students who might have difficulty moving from a self-contained classroom to a six-period day, depart-

mentalized junior high school. Some were recommended because they were just not ready for junior high in some social development areas, although they were doing fine academically. Some were identified because they had:

- been retained at least once,
- had poor home environments,
- were children of alcoholic parents,
- showed evidence of poor peer relationships,
- were introverted,
- were troublemakers,
- were slow learners,
- had rebellious attitudes.

The students and their parents were contacted by the junior high and invited to participate in this transition program; 48 students and their parents accepted.

The faculty agreed that the Quest for Success Skills Program would focus on self-esteem, because research suggests that poor self-esteem is correlated with failure to learn in school. They wanted the 48 students to see school as a place that cares. They wanted to foster attitudes that lead students to assume responsibility for their behavior and their learning. Much of success results from positive attitudes. If these incoming seventh-graders were to be successful, the faculty knew they had to develop attitudes that would make these students like school; but they first had to like themselves. This was where the program would begin.

As planning for the program was under way, four teachers received training in the Quest, a motivational program for adolescents sponsored by the Lion's Club. This training came to serve as the framework on which the Quest for Success Skills Program would be built. The staff met once in June and twice in July and planned activities for the first two days as well as one parent meeting for the 48 students. They postponed further planning until they had met the stu-

dents and could learn about their needs firsthand. In the middle of August, the program began with six dedicated teachers, the principal, and 48 students.

The program for the students consisted of 10 days of activities. Seven days had two-hour sessions, two were all-day sessions, and one day was a field trip designed to enhance students' pride in their community.

The first day the students received an overview of the program, engaged in get-acquainted exercises, and became familiar with the school and the program staff. The same procedure was followed in the evening meeting with parents.

One component of the first session was a panel that included the president of the Board of Education who had three children and was a grandmother, a parent who had students in the school, a former student who was the high school football star, a young lady who was active in school politics, and a former student who had been a dropout and had gotten his act together.

The students were invited to ask the panel any questions about what it took to be successful in school. It was a very enlightening session for both the panel members and the students. It also provided an opportunity for the staff to gain some insight into the students by observing their behavior. They were especially alert for those who withdrew, those who avoided eye contact, those who were upset by the questions and answers, and those who did not take part but acted out to get attention.

The second session dealt with the social, psychological, and physical changes in adolescence. The students met in large and small discussion groups. The discussions were frank and open, and students were encouraged to share their discussions with their parents. The staff made a concerted effort to open parent/student communications.

The membership of the small groups was changed every day so that students would have a chance to interact with everyone in the program. This was very important in that, when school started, they

would probably know someone in every class. The staff worked on developing a group feeling of "we're someone special" and a sense of belonging.

For the next two days' activities, the students were divided into two groups, with one group doing a low-ropes confidence course and the other doing an experiential unit on orienteering. On the following day, the two groups switched activities.

The low-ropes course is an outdoor challenge activity designed to teach students the value of making good decisions. Some of the learning outcomes from the course are that no one can succeed without help and teamwork, that each person has something to contribute in a challenging situation, and that everyone can't be successful at everything. Several of the staff had given up weekends to become certified as Challenge Course Leaders. The kids loved it, and so did the staff.

The first orienteering activity was conducted in the school so that the students could become familiar with the building and learn how to follow directions. In order to be successful in school, these students had to learn how to follow directions; orienteering was an excellent vehicle for this. Later in the day they went to a city park where they practiced using a compass, maps, and other orienteering equipment. Again they learned self-reliance as well as the need to depend on others.

On the other days the program used a variety of activities from the Quest materials dealing with communication, personal responsibility, and decision making. The sessions carried such provocative titles as "Celebrating the One and Only You," "Taking Responsibility – You Are in the Driver's Seat," "The Pits and the Peaks," "Blowing Off Steam with Blowing Esteem," "Pressure: Inside and Out," "A Three-Step Process for Saying No," and "Building Bridges, Not Walls: Handling Conflict in Friendships."

The community field trip was to an abandoned French Jesuit monastery that now houses a national museum. The field trip provided the students with insight into how the local area was settled and to the role the St. Louis area played in the history of our country.

The last day the students had to plan a community service project, which was to be carried out in the fall after school started. They decided to make favors for residents of a nearby senior citizen's home. They would take the favors to the home, present them to the residents, and talk with them. The students worked hard on their favors, spending many hours after school getting them ready. The senior citizens loved receiving the favors but especially enjoyed the interaction with the students. The students, in turn, received a boost in self-esteem when they realized they were contributing to the enjoyment of others.

After the two-week summer program, the staff agreed that it would be necessary to monitor the students after school started in order to maintain the gains that had been made during the program. Some students could be channeled into the OK Club, where they would receive academic and emotional support. Others could be helped to make the transition through involvement in clubs and sports. However, some would need to be pushed to become involved. For these a Helping Hands Club was formed, and students were actively recruited from the Quest program.

The club was designed as a service organization with students assisting in a variety of school and community activities. The many service activities they engaged in included making posters for student registration, cleaning up the school grounds, serving as ushers for PTA meetings at a local elementary school, visiting senior citizens' homes, making favors for teachers, and folding brochures for PTA meetings. Each of these activities made the students realize that they could be successful by contributing to the school and community.

The program included four parent meetings: one at the beginning of the program, one at the beginning of the second week, one during the first week of school, and the last two weeks later. The staff concurred that the parental component was vital to the success of the program. At the first meeting the parents came to realize that the problems their children faced were not unique. And it became apparent early

on that most parents were not aware of the tremendous physiological and emotional changes their children were going through during these early adolescent years. As they shared information and discussed their problems, the parents were able to function as a support group. Also, the parents' involvement communicated to the students that their parents were interested and concerned that they be successful in junior high.

Evaluation of the Quest for Success Skills Program

In evaluating the Quest program, the staff decided to use as a control group those students who had been recommended for the program but who chose not to participate. The assumption was that the "no-shows" were as much at risk as those who did attend. There is no objective way to determine degrees of at-riskness, so it cannot be stated with certainty that the Quest and control groups were comparable in all respects. Nevertheless, it seemed reasonable to make comparisons of the two groups as one form of evaluation. Following are some comparative data.

During the first month of school only 16% of the Quest participants had received any type of disciplinary referral compared to 82% of the control group. During the same month, 44% of Quest students received a poor work notice compared to 77% of the control group. During the first grading period, only 37% of the Quest students received at least one failing grade compared to 76% of the control group. These data suggest that over a short term the Quest program made a difference in the better performance of the Quest students compared to the control group. Longer-term comparisons would be necessary to substantiate this conclusion.

The I-CANN Program

The I-CANN Program (Individualized Course Alternative, Now or Never) was designed for the student who "falls through the cracks." These students are of average intelligence but still fail or barely pass. They drive their teachers to distraction at every turn, but they are often likeable and friendly. They just cannot seem to cope in some subjects; in others they do quite well. They do, however, constitute another at-risk group.

There is no easy explanation for these students' disruptive behavior and lack of achievement. When asked why they behave as they do, they say they don't know; or they shrug it off with such excuses as, "I don't like the teacher," "I don't like the subject," "I don't have any friends in there." Dealing with these youngsters is exasperating. They bring a variety of problems to school, and the school creates more problems for them. These problems must be dealt with before learning can take place.

I-CANN is a form of "time-out" program in which the students are removed from the regular classroom and placed in a smaller group setting with the goal of helping them get their act together. Students view I-CANN as their program, a place where they can let their hair down and discuss their varied problems. Thus, counseling becomes an important component of the program, perhaps more important than the academic content.

In I-CANN students have a close working relationship with an adult. Students engage in hands-on cooperative activities, with each contributing his or her skills to accomplish the task. All I-CANN classes have an academic focus developed around a series of meaningful projects. The small class size, the relaxed atmosphere, and treating kids as worthy and capable of making a contribution created a climate that allowed them to learn skills and content as well as grow in stature in their own eyes and those of their peers.

I-CANN Projects

Following are brief descriptions of some of the hands-on projects carried out in I-CANN classes.

Who Am I is an introductory I-CANN project devoted to understanding self and others. The students constructed individual collages using magazine clippings, newspaper articles, cartoons, and other visuals that represented their likes, dislikes, interests, and attitudes. After completing the collage, the students wrote a paper summarizing their work and presented an interpretation of their collage, which was videotaped. The students enjoyed this project, which took about five days. It allowed the students to become familiar with each other, and the teachers were able to learn much more about each student.

I-CANN Co., Inc. was the longest project undertaken. It involved establishing a fictitious company to be run by the students. Each I-CANN class had the option of working independently or forming a "merger" with another class. (Most classes chose to work independently because they would not have to divide their "capital gains" among a larger group.) This project involved many kinds of decision making as each class decided what product its company would manufacture, what materials would be needed, what they would cost, how the product would be produced, and how it would be sold.

Each student had to prepare a personal resumé, secure references, and be interviewed for different jobs within the company. Some of the jobs available included bookkeeper, public relations director,

shop foreman, and salesperson. After the jobs were filled and materials were gathered, production began. Examples of products manufactured were: leather keychains, wood candle holders, rock-and-roll calendars, memory books, a tie-dye service, and bakery goods.

This project allowed students to learn many things: making decisions cooperatively, working together as a team, how to get a job, and how a business operates in order to make a profit. But perhaps the most important lesson learned was how the attitudes and work habits they demonstrated now could affect their future prospects in a job or career. For example, when the students discussed the importance of having good references, several were dismayed to find that there wasn't anyone who would give them a good reference! Out of that discussion came the realization that what they did now will certainly affect their future.

Crystal Ball is an English project that grew out of a song with the same title. The song became the theme for the project. The project began with a discussion on the impact of technology and how quickly technology has advanced within the past 10 years. This was followed with a discussion of what our world might be like 15 years from now. This forecasting exercise generated some great discussions.

The students then wrote a paper depicting how they might fit into the world 15 years from now. They were told to write in the present tense starting with the sentence: "It is the year 2005, and I am _____ years old." Students were asked to consider what kind of job they might have, how they might go about getting that job, what kind of education or training they would need, will they have a family, where will they live, what will transportation be like, what the world situation might be like, and what kind of new technologies will be in use. The students had to pick an occupation or profession they were truly interested in pursuing. Along with the paper, the students could either make a poster depicting the future or make a model of one of the new technologies they had written about.

The Outsiders is an English and drama project involving the adaptation of the popular young adult novel, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, into a play. Each class participated in the adaptation. Where one class would leave off, the next would pick up until the play was completed. Students then rehearsed the play, made all the props, and recorded the performance on videotape.

This was an interesting project for all involved. The story itself had some good lessons about social class differences (an issue some students could relate to personally) and about making the right decisions. They learned about how a play is constructed, about writing dialogue, and about character development. And writing the play provided meaningful practice in the use of many basic language skills. But most important was the opportunity for the students to work together on a creative project.

The Surveys and Graphs project involved students in conducting opinion surveys and presenting the results in graph form. This project began with the students spending a week in the computer lab learning how to use computers to make bar, pie, and pictograph graphs. Students then selected survey topics that were important to them and interviewed teachers and students to get their opinions. Some of the survey topics were: Should boys wear earrings? Should teachers allow students to chew gum in class? and Is depletion of the ozone layer a matter for concern?

This project provided practice in computing percentages, presenting statistical information in a meaningful way, and constructing graphs. Students also learned different ways of collecting and interpreting statistical information. In conducting their surveys, students learned some important social skills, such as how to politely approach people to be interviewed and to thank them for their time.

Let's Fly a Kite was a fun activity involving making homemade kites. Students displayed considerable imagination in designing their own kites and learned how air currents affected the design of their kites.

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Puppet Power was a project involving the use of puppets in a substance abuse prevention program designed for elementary school children. Students constructed the puppet stages, rehearsed the script after school, and then went "on the road" with their puppet show to the local elementary schools.

In addition to many hands-on projects, the I-CANN classes periodically had outside speakers, who talked on motivational topics ranging from how to succeed in school and life to the consequences of dropping out of school.

The I-CANN Parent Component

Previous contact with the school for most parents of I-CANN students was usually of a negative nature. Such contacts typically were receiving failing notices from teachers or being called to school because of a discipline infraction by their child. Therefore, one of the I-CANN staff's first objectives was to overcome parents' negative attitudes and distrust of the school.

The counselor met with the parents of each student recommended for I-CANN and carefully outlined the program, the student's role, the school's role, and the parent's role. For many parents this was the first time they had been treated as an equal partner with the school in their child's education. The basic message communicated to parents was that they had an important role to play in their child's success. Not a single parent refused the school's invitation to participate as a full partner in the program.

Following the individual conferences, I-CANN parents were invited to a group meeting. Formal invitations were sent, food was served, and every parent was treated as a V.I.P. The session was designed to build rapport between parents, school, and students. The school's efforts to make the meeting a positive and supportive session paid off, with 100% of the parents attending. An unplanned outcome of the meeting was the formation of parent support groups. Also, some new friendships were established.

Subsequent meetings were held in congenial settings, such as the public library and a restaurant, where a meal was served at the school's expense. For many parents the cost of eating out was beyond their limited budgets, so attending a dinner hosted by the school conveyed to them that the school really cared about their child. Such efforts helped to build a bond with parents that had not existed before. Even when students did have a discipline problem, their parents approached the problem as one they had to work on with the school, whereas previously they might have become defensive and blamed the school for picking on their child.

Schools will have litte success with marginal or at-risk students without strong parent involvement. Achieving that involvement requires enlisting parents as full partners in the education of their children.

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The Student Assistance Council

The many problems that at-risk students bring to school are too complex for one person to solve. Therefore, the Student Assistance Council was created to bring the combined judgment and expertise of several staff members to bear on a student's problems. Rather than having to respond to a series of small crises on a case-by-case basis, the recommendations of the Student Assistance Council provide a coordinated and consistent approach for dealing with a student's problems. The council meets during the school day. Members are released from their regular duties to attend.

Membership of the Student Assistance Council consists of the counselor for at-risk students, department chairs, a special education instructor, a school counselor, the nurse, the principal, and a deputy juvenile officer. Others may be invited to participate in the council's deliberations if necessary for a particular student. These might include a drug counselor, a classroom teacher who has a positive relationship with the student, or staff from community service agencies that may be working with the student or the family.

When a referral is made to the Student Assistance Council, it secures as much information about the student as possible. All of the school records are available to the council, including anecdotal records of counselors and administrators. In addition, each of the student's teachers completes an information request form. The form asks for academic performance, attendance, classroom and school behavior,

peer relations, relevant family data, physical problems, any abrupt changes in behavior, and any other comments that the teacher feels are pertinent. The council also may request to interview the student. This is sometimes necessary when the council feels it needs to assess a student's attitudes and personality firsthand before making recommendations.

Based on the information presented, the council identifies all factors contributing to the student's academic or behavior problems that are preventing success in school. It then makes its recommendations for the interventions needed to correct or reduce the problems. This team approach brings together all the resources of the school and community in a coordinated effort to address the needs of at-risk students.

Conclusion

There is no single answer to solving the problems of marginal and at-risk students. There is no model program that schools can purchase and put into place. What we do know is that any successful program must start with an attitude of caring. This caring attitude must be reflected by the total school staff toward every student and his or her family.

Bringing the family and school closer together is a difficult task, but the rewards are worth the effort. Every family must feel that the school is a source of support when problems arise. The school can not solve every family problem, but it can be a stabilizing force in the lives of children. The challenge of public education in a democratic society is to help all children of all families succeed in school and life.

The programs described in this fastback are what one school has done to serve marginal and at-risk students. They are not offered as final solutions, but they do include components that the author feels are worthy of consideration by educators committed to serving at-risk youngsters.

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